FROM THE BESTSELLING WRITER

ALAN WAKE

Return to Sender

An Alex Casey Thriller

CHAPTER 1: LIGHT YOU UP

If Anton 'the fat man' Dubovic had ever earned a Boy Scout merit badge in Fire Prevention I wouldn't be in this mess. If the two sluggos with the fat man weren't scared to death of him, one of them might mention that spraying high-octane gasoline around a garage could have unpleasant consequences for all concerned. Everett Krieger, the sage of Wall Street, is screaming loud and clear about the fire hazard, but since Krieger is currently trussed up and the object of that high-octane drenching, his opinion isn't given much weight by the fat man. One spark, one gunshot, and the whole place goes up like a napalm strike.

Not that any of this would mean shit to me, except I'm currently hiding under Krieger's candy-apple red Ferrari Testarossa, which has about seven inches of road clearance, and the gasoline that the fat man is hosing down Krieger with is sluicing across the concrete floor of the garage and soaking me down to my boxers.

"You must understand, Mr. Krieger," said the fat man, "I am not nice person."

I heard gasoline spattering onto the concrete as Krieger blubbered. The fumes were making me lightheaded, but nobody else seemed to notice. Then again, they had murder on their minds.

"I bet you will stink when you burn, Mr. Krieger," said the fat man. "I bet you will stink like the bad barbeque that upsets my tummy."

Gasoline is *cold*, by the way, real shivery stuff, and Krieger's screaming had given me a headache. Plus, the tip of my nose kept grazing the underside of the Ferrari, so it was raw and sore by now. I was about ready to slide out from under the car, cap the fat man and the sluggos and warm myself up with my own

burning hair as the whole place whooshed into flames. I didn't do that. Instead, I carefully tilted my head to get a better look at what was happening a few feet away from me and promised myself that next time I'd exercise better judgment. I won't do that *either,* of course. I never learn.

Sure, I should have passed on the job when Krieger's daughter showed up last week, but the girl was scared to death. Lot of scared girls out there these days, but she did it better than most, and her being a homely thing kind of won me over, and dragging a kid along to boot. Hit me in my soft spot. All that family money, but Jane Krieger stayed a plain Jane. Big, thick glasses and awkward shoes, the way she slumped her shoulders when she talked… made me want to take care of her. She said her father, Wall St. financier Everett Krieger had gotten involved with some very dangerous men, and she was worried about something happening to him. "I know you're much too…talented for bodyguard work, Mr. Casey, I just want you to keep an eye on daddy. My father doesn't even have to know you've been hired. He'd probably be upset with me if he found out."

Turns out Everett Krieger hadn't just gotten involved with some dangerous men; he'd ripped off the fat man, a sweaty psychopath linked to the Russian mob. Anyone who thinks that fat men are jolly has never met Anton Dubovic. The last thing that cracked the fat man up, really gave him a case of the giggles, was that recording of the 911 call from a woman who had been carjacked in Texas. You've heard it, haven't you? Woman knows she's on her way to a real horrorshow, but she manages a cellphone call from the trunk of her car, connects to a 911 operator who's got the hiccups. The woman keeps whispering about being kidnapped, and the 911 operator can't hear her because he keeps hiccupping into the receiver, and the cellphone signal is dying, and the woman

is panicking, and the 911 operator keeps on hiccupping, saying 'pardon me,' 'pardon me, y'all.' A regular laugh riot. They found the woman's body a week later, what was left of her anyway. The fat man plays that tape all the time, and it never fails to bring tears to his eyes. He even imitates her voice and the hiccups.

So, when the fat man huffed and puffed his way into Krieger and Associates a year ago, wanting to park eighteen million dollars, Krieger should have very politely suggested that Mr. Dubovic would be better served at one of the many other fine investment houses, but he didn't. Instead, Krieger told the fat man what he told most of his clients: expect ten to twelve percent annual returns, and cash out anytime you felt like it. Things didn't quite work out like that. Krieger's enormous bet against the Australian dollar went south, coupled with a government takeover of the Nigerian oil industry and a crash in the Brazilian bond market… well, Krieger and Associates had suddenly collapsed like one of those fancy soufflés that Krieger used to jet to Paris to nibble for lunch. Krieger dodged a federal indictment by liquidating all his assets and offering his clients ten cents on the dollar. Most of his clients settled, but the fat man wasn't interested. The fat man had never tipped a waitress or been heard to say 'keep the change.'

"I told you, I don't *have* any offshore accounts," pleaded Krieger. He was a handsome, well-maintained aristocrat who struggled helplessly now, hands bound behind his back, his body roped tight to a supporting column of the garage. Gasoline dripped from his perfectly-cut gray hair. "Don't you think the feds would have found them by now if I did?"

"I should trust Fed dummies?" The fat man laughed. "Fed dummies cannot find their ass with GPS."

I imagine Krieger once took a certain pride in having his own gasoline pump in the garage. Special blend for the Ferrari, might

as well have been jet fuel. Perfectly safe as long as you gassed up in a well-ventilated space, but the fat man likes his privacy, so the doors to the garage were down, the gas running free, and the fumes in the garage so thick that a bright idea might set the place off.

From my vantage spot under car, I could see Krieger's charcoal gray trousers and his socks, cashmere socks with tiny clocks on them. Probably cost two hundred dollars a pair, but what do you expect, they're made from the downy wool scraped off the balls of mountain goats in Tibet. The fat man doesn't wear socks, just slips his 14-DDD tootsies into a pair of blue corduroy bedroom slippers from Target, throws on a bathrobe, and off he goes.

"Fed dummies did not find this secret estate of yours, yes?" said the fat man. "*Anton* found it, though. So, now you pay me."

"I *can't* pay you—"

Gasoline gushed against Krieger's necktie, splashing his Armani suit and perfect Windsor knot. Gasoline ran from his pants leg as though Krieger had pissed himself.

"There is no *can't*, Mr. Krieger," said the fat man. "There is only, 'yes, Anton, here are the numbers to my offshore accounts,' and 'please to forgive me for making you wait, Anton.'"

The fat man had a point. The feds *hadn't* discovered this hundred-acre estate in the rolling hills of upstate New York. It was probably registered to some shell company that existed only in a Bahamian corporation's financial footnotes. So give the fat man some credit. I wouldn't have found the place if a terrified Jane Krieger hadn't called me early this morning and given me the location, said she was *sure* something was going to happen.

I shifted slightly, saw the two sluggos, a couple of nervous XXXL meatbags in blue tracksuits, each of them standing on a radial tire to keep their shoes dry, like that's going to save them if

the garage blows. The smart thing to do if you want Krieger to give up the information would be drag him outside, drench him with gas out *there*, but maybe the fat man wants to use the safe familiarity of the garage against Krieger, like tucking a guy into his soft, comfy bed and maybe fluffing his pillow before breaking out the vicegrips.

"I am losing patience, Mr. Krieger," said the fat man, his thinning black hair plastered to his skull. "You seem to delight in provoking me."

"I'm an honest businessman," said Krieger, lower lip quivering.

The fat man's tiny eyes glowed as he pulled a gold cigarette lighter out of the pocket of his bathrobe.

"Boss," one of the sluggos said gently, "you *really* don't want to do that."

The fat man held the cigarette lighter in front of Krieger's face. "I will light you up like birthday candle."

"Boss, *please*," said the other sluggo. "Krieger goes up, we all go up." He dragged his shoe through the puddled gasoline on the floor. "See boss? Boom."

"Boom." The fat man nodded, pink jowls jiggling in the glare of the overhead fluorescents. "Ah yes, I understand now." He slipped the lighter back into his bathrobe, pulled out a switchblade. "This is safe, yes?" he said to Krieger, "won't cause fire." He flicked it open, admired his reflection in the blade, and I found myself wondering if hippos thought they were beautiful too.

Krieger swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

The fat man carefully slid the blade into Krieger's right nostril. "See?" He looked at the sluggos, waited for a moment, then ripped the blade through the side of Krieger's nose. "See, no boom."

Krieger howled, lurched against the ropes that bound him to

the pillar, blood pouring from his nose.

"You will give me the numbers for your offshore accounts, now," the fat man said to Krieger.

"P-please," stammered Krieger.

The fat man slid the blade into Krieger's other nostril.

"Wait!" gasped Krieger.

"Yes?" said the fat man, cupping one ear. "Did I hear something?"

"The account numbers," Krieger said, his cut nostril flapping with every breath. "The account numbers are encrypted. Can't be cracked. You…you need me alive."

"Then alive you stay, good fellow." The fat man slowly, gently removed the blade from Krieger's nostril. "Where are the numbers, Mr. Krieger?"

I was lying right under the edge of the Ferrari's passenger side now, soaked with gasoline. I hoped that Krieger would direct them to the house, his office, anyplace where they would have to leave him alone, or at least divide their forces, while they confirmed his story.

"They're under the car," whimpered Krieger. "The numbers are in a small metal case attached to the underside of the passenger compartment."

Great. Just…great. I scooted farther back under the car, looking for the case. *There*. A silvery case the size of a cellphone.

"You are certain?" said the fat man.

I could see the case clearly: stainless-steel, secured with two spring-clips, locked solidly in place, but designed for quick removal when needed.

"If you are stalling for time, I will lose charming good nature, Mr. Krieger," said the fat man.

"You think I'm *stupid*?" said Krieger, blood bubbling from his

nose. "You're not going to kill me. You need me…Anton. Get the case. We'll have to go to my office in the city to decrypt the code. I'll transfer the funds into your account tonight. Double your money."

The fat man nodded. "I believe you, Mr. Krieger."

Krieger sagged with relief.

"No, you are not stupid," said the fat man, looking into his eyes, "but I think you are perhaps too trusting of your own uniqueness." He smoothed Krieger's stained white shirt with one hand, then drove the knife into the man's heart with the other. "It seems, in fact, Mr. Krieger, that *you* are not required to decrypt the code," he said, cleaning the blade on Krieger's necktie as the man's head flopped lifelessly. He slipped the knife back into his bathrobe, turned to the sluggos. "Please to hit the hydraulic autolift."

I waited until the Ferrari was waist-high off the floor before sliding out from under, the case clutched in one hand. I waved as I scrambled to my feet. "Hey fellas, how's it hangin?'

The sluggos reached for their guns before they caught themselves. The fat man just yawned, belted his bathrobe tighter around his enormous frame.

"Open the garage door and air the place out, idiots," the fat man said to the sluggos. "Then you can shoot our uninvited guest." He raised his bushy eyebrows to me, half-bowed. "My sincere apologies."

I pulled my own piece out, centered it between his eyes. "None needed."

"Ah, the classic standoff," said the fat man, unperturbed. "I feel like one of your American cowboys at the A-OK Corral." He pushed out his lower lip. "Let us leave the door down, shall we? Gunfire hurts my ears anyway." There were way too many teeth

in his smile. "I want to see your face when they break your neck, my dear cowpoke."

The sluggos rushed me, but they were slow, clearly used to easy prey. I dodged the first one's attack matador-style, helped him along with a push that slammed him face-first into a metal tool cabinet. He dropped like a slaughterhouse steer.

The other sluggo circled in, but he was cautious now. He sloshed through the gasoline, closer and closer, and I let him, because he was one of those big guys who forgot to keep his chin down. Maybe he never had to worry about it before. He grabbed my left shoulder, grinding down on the bone before I drove my right hand into his throat, crushing his windpipe. He fell to his knees, trying to breathe as his airway swelled shut.

My left arm was completely numb as the fat man charged, barreling at me; he moved faster than the sluggos, faster than I would have believed. One swipe of his enormous paw practically tore my ear off before I could retreat, head ringing, He kept coming. I kicked him twice in the midsection, kicked him *hard;* the strike should have shattered a few ribs, maybe even ruptured his spleen, but the fat man was so padded with blubber that he merely grunted, his smile firmly in place — a killer whale in a blue terrycloth bathrobe.

The fat man circled in as I backed up.

"Not leaving so soon, are you?" mocked the fat man. "We are just getting to know each other."

"It's *way* past my bedtime," I told him. "I need my beauty sleep."

"The case."The fat man snapped his fingers. "Give me the case and maybe I will let you go on your way."

"Give me your address; I'll mail it to you." I feinted high as he rushed me, then pivoted, whip-kicked his left knee, heard it crunch.

He ground his teeth as he collapsed, but didn't utter a sound. He sprawled beside the Ferrari, his bathrobe sopping up gasoline. His smile had returned. I looked down; saw what was making him so happy. Three small dots on my shirt. Three small red dots getting larger. I hadn't even seen him take the switchblade out, hadn't felt myself getting stabbed.

"Come closer, little one, I'll put a Band-Aid on your boo-boo," said the fat man.

"That…that's okay," I said.

The fat man patted the floor beside him. "Come on, no hard feelings."

"You look like a guy who holds a grudge."

"Me?" The fat man wiped an imaginary tear. "You have hurt my feelings."

Unsteady now, I clutched at the case, but it slipped from my grasp, clattered to the floor. I bent to retrieve it, stumbled, and kicked it under the car. I could see it clearly, right under the transmission.

"A pity," said the fat man, eyes on the case. "Whatever shall you do now?"

The red spots on my shirt were getting bigger.

"You really should sit down before you hurt yourself," said the fat man.

I staggered toward the door, legs rubbery, and half-fell onto a wooden bench against one wall.

"Isn't that better?" called the fat man, grunting as he bent under the Ferrari, one leg dragging behind him. "You just take a rest while I get the case, and then we can have a long talk."

I gave him time. Gave him until he was halfway under the car, his hand on the case before quick-limping it over to the controls of the hydraulic jack and flicking the switch.

The fat man squealed as the jack lowered, slithering across the slick floor, trying to get out. Almost made it out, too. Got his head free anyway, the rest of him pressed against the concrete by the weight of the Ferrari.

"You comfortable?" I asked him.

"Little…tight," said the fat man. "You might…raise it up a bit."

"Sure." I lowered it slightly. Heard him gasp. "Whoops."

"What…what you want?" hissed the fat man.

"World peace."

The fat man chuckled. I had to give him credit for that.

"Oh, you mean *now*," I said. "Well…I'd like to know how you found Krieger's secret estate."

The fat man glared at me.

The spots on my shirt were growing, but it was nothing terminal. It did *hurt* though. I lowered the Ferrari a little more.

The fat man groaned louder.

"How did you find this place?" I repeated.

"A…a beautiful little bird told me," the fat man said, his breathing even more labored now.

"Lucky you."

"Yes. I am most lucky."

"The bird who told *me* wasn't so beautiful," I said.

"S-sad."

I watched him squirm under the Ferrari, grunting with the effort, trying to get clear, but he was caught, no two ways about it. I walked over to where Krieger's body hung from the post, fished his wallet out of his suit jacket. Nice wallet. Probably looked better on the alligator, but still…

Not much cash in the wallet. Rich guys never carried much cash, but Krieger had a black, invitation-only, no-limit AMEX

card, so I guess he thought he had it covered. You could buy a skyscraper with that card, and all they'd ask was 'would you like that giftwrapped, sir?' Two photos. One of Krieger on an airport runway, standing in front of his Gulfstream 550, the other of Krieger and some beautiful girl. Strong family resemblance, although the daughter had better cheekbones. Beautiful girl, beautiful bird. No kid. No wedding ring.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the fat man still struggling under the car, but I couldn't take my eyes away from the photo.

Women are amazing. They get rid of their contact lenses and slip on a pair of ugly, thick glasses and they look different. They don't wash their hair for a few days, let it just lie there in a tangled mess, and they look even more different. But it's the *attitude* that really sells things. Slump around, eyes downcast, let your voice quiver at all the right moments…you're a whole new person now. You're no longer that gorgeous, confident, sexy creature in the photograph, no, now you're the mousy, scared little introvert that shuffled into my office, begging me to watch over her daddy.

The fat man had met the beautiful bird, because that's what worked best to snare him. Me, I met plain Jane, the not so beautiful bird, the one with the borrowed kid, because that was the one who could get to me. She figured no matter what, *one* of us was going to deliver the overseas bank codes to her.

I looked at Krieger dangling there, his shirt a gory mess. Brilliant guy, tough and cold-blooded, but he wasn't even in the same league as his little girl. He should have just handed over all his money to her, the whole secret stash, and saved his life. Maybe if he had cooperated, Jane would have given him an allowance and let him keep the Gulfstream 550.

I glanced over at the fat man. "Did she tell you she knew how

to decrypt the code?"

"Let me *out* of here," said the fat man.

"Doesn't matter," I told him. "If she doesn't know how to do it, she's probably already got some other sap on the line who *does* know how."

"I have case, you foolish person," gasped the fat man. "Let me out."

"You have the case." I held up the thumb drive I had palmed earlier. "I have what was *inside* the case."

The fat man screamed in rage, flopping around in a pond of gasoline, his neck extending from under the Ferrari like some enraged turtle. "Hey, smart guy!" He had somehow managed to get one hand free and was holding the shiny, gold cigarette lighter over the pool of gas.

"Don't!"

The fat man's hand shook. "Come die with me, boychick!"

I slammed the hydraulics just as he flicked the lighter, the Ferrari crashing down on him before the gas could ignite, squashing the fat man with a loud, moist POP. Blood mingled with the gasoline, sent rainbows swirling across the floor. I had to turn away.

I dabbed at the spots on my shirt with my fingertips. I didn't feel so good, but I felt better than the fat man.

The fat man's organization was going to be coming after me. Not like they would be crying in their vodka over what had happened to him, but still, they couldn't allow some freelancer like me to step on the big boss man. That's okay. Nothing like people wanting to kill you to make you appreciate a slow sunrise, a fast car, or a fresh cup of coffee. The fat man's organization was the least of my problems, though; it was Jane that I was worried about.

I slipped the thumb drive into my pocket and started for the

door, wincing with every step. The coded bank numbers weren't going to do me any good but they were going to bring Jane running. Her, or the next guy she had lined up to play fetch. Didn't matter. I opened the door, stepped out into the cool night air and kept walking. Yeah, I might be looking over my shoulder, but Jane better keep an eye on her rearview mirror, too. Plain Jane or beautiful Jane, whichever one I met next, she's going to find out who her *new* daddy is.